



LDS Growth Encyclopedia on Missionary Work and Church Growth (Missiology)

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Culture and Society

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Posted: July 21st, 2014

Culture is commonly defined as the shared beliefs, traditions, and knowledge of a people whereas society is a particular grouping of people that have similar beliefs, traditions, interests and values. Culture and society strongly influence LDS Church growth trends and missionary approaches as they impact both supply-sided and demand-sided factors, namely the receptivity of populations targeted for proselytism and the availability of mission resources. Government regulations on religious freedom and societal norms prohibiting proselytism and conversion to another faith can at times reduce church growth if missionaries cannot be assigned or proselytism cannot occur. The influence of culture and society on LDS growth trends is evident in ethnoreligious ties, nominalism, secularism, finding methods, convert retention and member activity rates, and meetinghouse construction.

Ethnoreligious ties promote the religious, societal, cultural, and political imposition of a traditional faith's values and expectations on members of the ethnic group. Depending on the influence of secularism and fundamentalism on society, ethnoreligious ties can result in disinterest in nontraditional faiths as a result of indifference to personal religiosity within the framework of organized religion or authoritarian allegiance to the traditional faith. More commonly, ethnoreligious ties have a strong correlation with nominalism as there is a societal expectation to affiliate with the traditional religious group but there is often less pressure to actually practice the tenets of the faith outside of observing special observances and holidays. Consequently many of these individuals exhibit low receptivity to LDS missionary efforts due to low levels of personal religiosity and disinterest in other religious groups.

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Affiliation to a particular religious group without actively following the beliefs and practices prescribed by the faith is called nominalism. Individuals who nominally identify with a particular religious group do so regardless of their knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the faith, personal devotion to living its tenets, and self-perceived importance and practicality of religious behaviors in everyday life. In other words, nominal members are the total number of individuals who self-affiliate with a religion group. Nominalism occurs as a result individuals willfully affiliating with a religious group, government stipulating that all citizens affiliate with the traditional religious group by default unless they specifically state otherwise, or governments maintaining special relationships with the traditional religious faith that promote its acceptance in mainstream society. Nominalism has both facilitated and deterred the growth of the LDS Church. The Church in Latin America has successfully converted many nominal Catholics notwithstanding the cultural heritage of most to the Catholic Church. This achievement has been largely attributed to the extremely small percentage of practicing Catholics in the region. Many of these lackadaisical societal attitudes of personal religious practice carry over into the LDS Church and have contributed to low member activity rates throughout the region. Notwithstanding, nominalism in Latin America has provided most with a background knowledge of Christianity without becoming socialized into the active Catholic community. These conditions have provided a fertile field for finding and baptizing new members through traditional teaching and proselytism strategies.

Secularism in culture and society frequently lowers receptivity to organized religion. Secularism in government has been frequently accompanied with the rejection or indifference of religious beliefs and values. Although it is not entirely clear how secularism in government often reduces the religiosity of societies and cultures, the role of religion as a cultural artifact rather than a source of policy and legislation in government appears to have had an influence on how religion is viewed by the general population. Many secular countries have experienced modernization and have high standards of living, resulting in increased materialism and consumerism. A combination of secular government and modernization have eroded the religiosity of most populations in Western Europe, industrialized East Asian countries, and North America. The governments of some countries have enforced secular principles to the extreme that they violate religious freedom under the premise that religion creates inequality. Countries where governments have professed or have officially adopted atheism often experience low levels of religiosity, especially when government restrictions on religious freedom prevent worship and higher living conditions are achieved such as in the former Soviet Union and communist countries in East Asia.

Cultural and societal conditions strongly influence convert retention and member activity rates due to the common beliefs, attitudes, and practices regarding personal religious expression and conformity with societal norms. The Church generally experiences its highest convert retention rates in countries where weekly attendance in a religious service is a societal norm such as Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Church has not appeared to more strictly enforce prebaptismal qualifications in these nations but has achieved good convert retention rates due, in part, to the societal importance of active participation in religious organizations. The Church has experienced some of its lowest convert retention rates in countries where the vast majority of the population is nominally affiliated with the traditional Christian denomination of that country such as in Latin America and Europe. The lack of importance placed by society on church participation has negatively affected LDS convert retention rates in these nations as the Church can easily baptize large numbers of new converts within extremely short periods of time. Quota-driven baptismal practices have taken advantage of these conditions with little consideration for long-term activity. This has resulted in catastrophically low convert retention rates as the vast majority of newly baptized converts have few, if any, personal religious habits that integrate into their new faith. Little, if any, member-missionary participation from local leaders and ordinary members in countries where low levels of religiosity and church attendance occur further challenging convert retention efforts.

Methods for finding investigators significantly varies by cultural and societal conditions. In locations with high receptivity to the LDS Church, street contacting and door-to-door proselytism can be effective proselytism activities due to sizable percentages of the population exhibiting interest in organized religion and LDS teachings. However, these finding activities number among the least efficient and effective according to returned missionaries and church leaders in most areas of the world.^[1] The primary challenge to baptize and retain individuals found through street proselytism and door-to-door finding centers on the lack of socialization of these individuals into their assigned congregation. Individuals who were initially found by full-time missionaries but make friends at church have the greatest prognosis for long-term activity as they do not depend on full-time missionaries for ecclesiastical and social support. Individuals found through full-time missionary proselytism efforts who do not make friends at church and rely on missionaries to attend church experience a poor prognosis for long-term activity as missionary transfers disrupt the post-baptismal support system.

There have been challenges for the Church to build meetinghouses that meet local needs and are culturally appropriate. For example, in Mozambique missionaries report that some LDS chapels are ostentatious and convey an image of a wealthy, American church. Although the Church seeks to provide clean and beautiful chapels for worship, some of these structures are reported by missionaries to seem very out of place and perhaps even condescending in the context of Mozambican living standards, in addition to the high costs incurred in their construction and maintenance. In Mongolia, the Church has built several large meetinghouses that are reminiscent of meetinghouses in the Western United States rather than religious buildings in Asia.

There remains a need to tailor teaching approaches to cultural and societal conditions in many areas of the world. Past and contemporary missionary lessons and manuals have primarily address Westernized, Christian audiences and can be difficult to generalize to Eastern, Muslim, traditionalist, Orthodox, and South Asian cultures. The development of resources that specifically explain LDS teachings to the understanding of secularists, Muslims, Buddhists, Confucians, Taoists, Shinto, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and traditionalists is needed in order for greater comprehension of basic LDS teachings and improved success in converting and retaining converts who previously affiliated with one or more of these religious groups. The progression of current missionary lessons is often too rapid and assumes that individuals from these religious groups have a basic knowledge of Christianity such as the importance of scripture, prophets, an individual's relationship with God, and the concept of sin.

Culture and society will continue to play a significant role in LDS Church growth and missionary work as the Church expands missionary work into additional locations and previously unreached peoples. The continued expansion of LDS outreach throughout the world will generate a greater need for specialized teaching approaches that are solidly grounded in LDS doctrine but that also present information in a culturally appropriate manner.

^[1] Val Johnson, R. "How to Be a Great Member Missionary," Ensign, August 2007.
<http://www.lds.org/ensign/2007/08/how-to-be-a-great-member-missionary>